

IDAHO CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP

Historic Overview of Local Conservation Districts, Idaho Soil Conservation Commission, Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, and National Resources Conservation Service

Nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the United States are helping local people to conserve soil, water, forest, wildlife, and other related natural resources. This movement began largely in part to Hugh Hammond Bennett, who published a bulletin entitled *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*, which discussed soil erosion and its potential impact on the entire nation. Bennett, more than any other person, influenced the development of the soil conservation movement in the United States. Study and observation as a soil scientist making soil surveys to assist agricultural development convinced him that soil erosion was a menace to long-term productivity of the land. He drew attention to the problem through writing and public speaking. Congress acted on this information by funding ten erosion research stations across the country. In 1930, one of these stations was established in the Palouse River Valley of Idaho and Washington. The Pullman Research Station remains today and has made a significant impact on conservation activities in Idaho.

Soil erosion came to the forefront of government concern during the Dust Bowl catastrophe of the 1930's, which was an ecological and human disaster caused by misuse of farming land in the Midwest and years of sustained drought. In 1933, Bennett became the first director of the federal Soil Erosion Service. As director, he received some of the emergency employment money from the Great Depression and planned soil and water conservation method demonstrations in selected watersheds on farms near the erosion experiment stations.

Congress created the Soil Conservation Service (now known as Natural Resources Conservation Service) with the Soil Conservation Act of 1935. The U.S. Department of Agriculture wanted to extend soil conservation measures beyond the scattered demonstration projects that Bennett was currently employing. Policymakers developed the Standard State Soil Conservation District Law that outlined a new unit of government, the conservation district, which would be organized under state, not federal, law.

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent letters to all states urging them to pass legislation for the organization of soil conservation districts. Two years later, Idaho's Soil Conservation District Law was passed during the 1939 legislative session. During the first year of the passage of the law, five soil conservation districts were organized. Today, there are 51 conservation districts in Idaho, which function as subdivisions of state government. Each conservation district is led by a locally elected, five or seven member board of supervisors. Districts are non-regulatory organizations that work with private landowners to promote conservation of natural resources.

The Idaho Soil Conservation District Law also established the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission (ISCC) and set forth its responsibilities as a state agency. The law included provisions for the ISCC to provide support and service to all Idaho conservation districts. On April 22, 1939, the ISCC held its first meeting at the Governor's office. In 1944, the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (IASCD) was organized to provide a unified voice for conservation districts in Idaho and to work closely with ISCC on conservation issues and priorities. IASCD provides an avenue members can use to discuss common problems, strategies and techniques. Early ISCC and IASCD activities centered on organizing local soil conservation districts throughout the state and by 1952, 31 districts had been organized and the two parties agreed to work together to organize the other 20 districts.

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In 1959, ISCC set up an official office and hired its first full-time employee, which was housed within the Department of Lands. In the late 1970's, the ISCC staff consisted of an administrator, a secretary, and a handful of soil scientists. The soil scientists were assigned to federal Soil Conservation Service field offices to assist them with Idaho's soil mapping efforts, which was the first of many cooperative efforts between ISCC and the Soil Conservation Service.

Throughout the years, ISCC and IASCD worked jointly on many important projects. In 1973, they drafted a sediment and erosion control bill in response to the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments of 1972 (Clean Water Act). The Clean Water Act required a regulatory system to ensure the goals and objectives of the Act were being met. The ISCC and IASCD worked together to ensure a voluntary approach to addressing non-point water pollution from agriculture throughout the State of Idaho.

In 1979, Governor John Evans approved the Idaho Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan (APAP), which was Idaho's response to Section 208 of the Clean Water Act and represented the agricultural portion of the State Water Quality Management Plan. The APAP is the implementing action plan for all non-point source agricultural sector activities in the state. The Idaho Board of Health and Welfare was granted legal authority to adopt the rules and regulations for the administration of the State Agricultural Water Quality Program (SAWQP). The purpose of the program was to protect and enhance the quality and value of the water resources of Idaho by financially assisting the conservation districts in the control and abatement of water pollution from agricultural lands, including cropland, rangeland and grazeable woodland. The ISCC was tasked by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ, formerly Health and Welfare's Division of Environmental Quality) to jointly administer this program. Eventually, all planning authority was relinquished to ISCC, facilitating the development of a statewide agricultural water plan.

The ISCC realized the success of the plan depended upon partnership with IASCD and the local soil conservation districts. In 1980, through collaborative efforts between ISCC, IASCD and the local districts, the legislature modified the Idaho Code to allow use of the Water Pollution Control Account for grants to local districts. In 1981, the first SAWQP grant was awarded and during the next 19 years, 34 planning projects and 48 implementation projects were granted to conservation districts across Idaho. The districts used these grant funds to provide technical assistance, conduct informational activities and cost-share with farmers and ranchers to install best management practices (BMP) in high-priority watershed project areas. The DEQ and ISCC jointly administered this program.

In 1989, Governor Cecil D. Andrus designated ISCC as the lead agency for coordinating implementation of the anti-degradation plan for agricultural practices through the conservation districts. Each district, in consultation with ISCC, was tasked to adopt BMPs that would protect beneficial uses as identified in State Water Quality Standards. These rules and regulations also formalized the existing requirements for all conservation districts to develop a five-year plan. Later that same year, ISCC hired three Program Coordinators to directly serve and guide conservation districts with their planning efforts, conducting state business properly, adhering to District Law, and fiscal accountability.

As part of the fiscal year 1993 appropriation to ISCC (SB 1515), \$49,700 was included as program maintenance for Resource Conservation Support. In the analyst comments it stated, "Decision unit #1 above provides funds from the Resource Conservation Account to enable the Idaho Association of

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Soil Conservation Districts to hire an Executive Director position. The SCD's would contract with the Soil Conservation Commission, which received funding in operating expenses, to hire the position." Since then, ISCC has continued to provide annual funding and in-kind services for IASCD office support. In recent years, there has been a signed memorandum of agreement between the two entities and funding has not exceeded \$59,614 per year.

As part of the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994, the Soil Conservation Service was one of many federal agencies reorganized under the "reinventing government" initiative. The agency's name was changed from the Soil Conservation Service to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to focus on the fact that the agency's conservation mission encompassed water, air, plants, and animals in addition to soil.

Perhaps the most successful tool to come from the conservation partnership is the OnePlan Conservation Planner. The idea was born in the early 1990's by Paul Calverley, a State Conservationist at NRCS, who wanted to develop a single conservation plan that would help landowner's meet every agency's needs and specifications. Over the years, NRCS coordinated the development of the design and software for OnePlan with input from ISCC, IASCD, EPA, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, and several other agencies and organizations. Today, OnePlan is an easily-accessible, user-friendly suite of conservation planning tools to manage soil and water conservation activities according to information, guidelines, and regulations from all interested local, state, and federal agencies. The OnePlan Coordinator is hired by IASCD with partial funding from ISCC.

In 1997, two major changes took place at ISCC. First, ISCC moved from the Department of Lands to the Department of Agriculture. Secondly, ISCC was designated the lead agency for Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) on grazing and agriculture land in Idaho (Idaho Code 39-3602), which was a result of a Clean Water Act lawsuit filed by the Idaho Conservation League and the Idaho Sportsman's Coalition against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA was ordered in 1995 by the U.S. District Court to file a complete and reasonable schedule for the development of TMDLs on all water bodies designated as water quality limited. The Court accepted the list and set an eight-year schedule to complete TMDLs covering all 962 listed bodies of water (1998-2006). Additionally, the legislature infused \$1.5 million into the Resource Conservation and Rangeland Development Program (RCRDP) to assist landowners, farmers and ranchers in securing funds to carry out TMDL development. RCRDP is a revolving loan fund that offers grants and long-term, low-interest loans for conservation improvement projects. ISCC actively manages over 220 loans with approximately \$10 million.

The Clean Water Act lawsuit was one of two key points of legislation that helped define the current working relationship between ISCC and IASCD. The other was the authority given to ISCC by the legislature to expend funds from RCRDP to hire three Water Quality Analysts and three Water Quality Resource Conservationists. In essence, ISCC had operating funds but no approved state full-time positions available. Faced with this important workload, ISCC asked IASCD to become their partner through an agreement to employ and administer the needed TMDL field staff in order to carry out ISCC's responsibilities in the TMDL effort. The first signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between ISCC and IASCD in 1998 covered the funding for the six TMDL staff.

Since 1998, state funding has allowed ISCC staff and contractors (through IASCD) to be strategically located throughout the state to successfully address the TMDL challenge. This effort has resulted in

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the completion of 67 TMDL watershed implementation plans for agriculture, with 18 additional plans in progress. In addition, the field staff has been proactively working with local districts, farmers and ranchers to implement BMPs through the integration of state and federal funding programs.

In 2000, the legislature introduced the Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA) and gave ISCC the authority to implement and oversee this program. ISCC designates priority areas and works primarily through local conservation districts to cost-share projects with landowners. This partnership has successfully treated over 200,000 critical acres of agricultural lands, 80 miles of stream, 100 livestock confinement areas, and assisted nearly 1,000 landowners. Through the integration of WQPA with other funding sources, the conservation partnership of ISCC, IASCD and NRCS has been successful in obtaining targeted federal funds to treat state and local water concerns. The most recent examples of this funding integration are the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) and the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP). The financial resources of these programs are being used to assist producers in applying conservation practices to reduce surface and ground water impacts from agricultural non-point sources and to implement the state's Comprehensive Aquifer Management Plan.

Presently, ISCC is focused on their responsibilities to local conservation districts by providing them with policies, programs, capacity development and other assistance. Technical assistance is offered to maintain and enhance capabilities to serve Idaho's conservation districts, private landowners and public managers to address local issues and meet mandates, such as Idaho OnePlan, Carbon Sequestration, and TMDLs. ISCC also develops outreach programs to enhance the awareness of the conservation partnership leadership roles for non-regulatory, incentive-based resource coordination. It is ISCC's goal to improve efficiencies and accountability on every level and to provide the highest level of professional, reliable and ethical assistance in a manner deserving of public trust.

DISCLAIMER: This report was compiled by ISCC staff in August 2009 with input from IASCD and NRCS. It is intended to be a historic overview of the Idaho Conservation Partnership and is not inclusive of all programs and activities of each independent agency.

For more information:

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